Preston Hollow Presbyterian Church
Forgiveness
Matthew 18:21-35; Psalm 130
September 14, 2014
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I received a telephone call from one of my favorite people: a church member and dear friend. Norma was a faithful Presbyterian Christian, was in worship every Sunday, she had both a sweet spirit and a sharp sense of humor. She said, "I need to talk to you about a serious issue." That's the kind of message that elicits an immediate pastoral response so I said I'd be right over. When she greeted me at her front door she had a worship bulletin in her hand. I could tell that it was from the previous Sunday's service. I could see that she had underlined some of it – in red.

We sat down and she said, "John, why do we have to pray that depressing Prayer of Confession every week?"

> "We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed.
> We have turned from our neighbor, ignored the pain of the world, passed by the hungry, the poor and the oppressed."

Some of the older Prayers of Confession were pretty grim.

> "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done. And we have done those things we ought not to have done (which is true enough). And there is no health in us."

I always wanted to say: "No health in us? None? We are totally depraved, as the 17-th century Calvinist concluded?"

Norma said: "Now listen to what you made me say last Sunday. (I had chosen one of the new prayers.)

> "We lay waste to the land and pollute the sea.
> We condone evil, prejudice, warfare and greed."

"Now, John…really. I didn't do all that last week. I was pretty busy… doctor's appointment, shopping, got my hair done, went out to dinner – volunteered at church, too. I didn't have much time for laying waste to the land and polluting the seas and I certainly don't condone evil, whatever on earth that means."

It was all good-natured, of course. And it was a great question and we had a good conversation.

I tried to explain that Christians generally believe that there is something amiss at the heart of things – that things are not the way they are supposed to be – that human beings keep messing things up. Our first and primal

story is about a man and woman who refuse to obey the simple rules – who become convinced that they know better than the creator and so go ahead and eat the forbidden fruit. When the man is confronted, he blames the woman and the woman blames the snake.

The great 20th-century scholar theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once quipped that Original Sin was the one Christian doctrine that could be empirically verified every single day – simply by reading the newspaper.

I tried to explain that when we Presbyterians use the word sin – we do not mean what many of us were taught: that drinking, smoking, gambling are sins and so is anything that has anything to do with sex. I tried to explain that by sin we mean the gap between humankind and God, and God's will and intent for creation. I tried to explain that we are al part of that gap – corporately as well as personally – whether or not we actually had time last week to lay waste the earth and pollute the seas, we are part of huge systems that do. And I tried to explain that the fundamental thing we believe is that God forgives, accepts us as we are, expects more from us, but when it comes to our failings and shortcomings, our sins, God – the Psalmist promised – does not hold them against us – but forgives. It is the highpoint of our worship.

"In Jesus Christ we are forgiven." When we come to that every week I want to stand up and cheer and whistle – like a Chicago Cub hit a come-from-behind home run and we won the game in spite of dismal play on the field.

Jesus talked a lot about forgiveness. When Peter asked him once how many times he should forgive someone who not only wronged him, but kept wronging him – he chose a big number. 7 times? Jesus' response was stunning – 77 times, which is a lot of forgiving. Or 70 times 7 – either way it seems to me a metaphor for a lot, an injunction to stop counting and get on with forgiving.

The story he then told is not pretty…but it is a parable of the Kingdom of Heaven he said. A king decides to settle accounts with his debtors, who happen also to be his slaves/servants. One owes a great debt of money, much more than he can pay. He is in danger of losing everything and begs for mercy. The King forgives his debt. The same man subsequently – in a similar situation – refuses mercy, insists on full payment of a debt another owes him, and when the debtor cannot repay, the ungrateful servant has him thrown in prison. The king hears about it – summons him, dresses him down for his complete lack of mercy, hands him over to be punished until he can repay. Jesus concludes: "So will God do to you – who does not forgive a brother or sister from your heart."

There is apparently a working connection between forgiveness and forgiving. It is a profound suggestion.

When he taught his friends to pray he included “Forgive us as we forgive others.” Matthew says, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” Luke says, “Forgive us our sins.” Presbyterians have always gone with Matthew – which someone said shows that Presbyterians would rather have their debts paid than their sins forgiven. Methodists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, and almost everyone else say “trespasses,” which makes for quite a mouthful – “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

“Forgive, and you will be forgiven,” Jesus said (Luke 6:37). And the very last words he spoke before he died on the cross were, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Forgiveness is hard. Who doesn’t know about that? The older paradigm feels a lot better and seems to be just and make sense: punishment for wrongdoing, revenge, retaliation: you do it to me, I’ll do it to you – only harder: an eye for an eye – which someone observed feels morally symmetrical and fair but leaves everybody blind.

We seem hard-wired for revenge. I confess – I am. When I saw the picture of an Islamic extremist, an ISIS operative in a black hood, speaking in a British accent, brandishing a knife he would subsequently use on the throat of a kneeling, defenseless American journalist, rage boiled up inside me. I wanted revenge. I wanted what he did to be done to him. I hoped President Obama would bomb him personally. I sense I am not the only one who was revolted, appalled, and enraged.

I recalled a conversation I had with my longtime colleague and friend, John Boyle, not long before he died earlier this year. He was a minister, first Southern Baptist until he saw the light and became a Presbyterian. He had a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology and was the founder and Director of our Counseling Center in Chicago. After he retired he continued on our staff as an Associate and we all turned to John with our toughest pastoral situations. He was wise, kind, and strong. He served in the 42nd Infantry, Rainbow Division, in WWII. I asked him many questions and loved to listen to him reminisce about his experience, fighting his way across France, to Strasburg, over the Rhine into Germany, Nuremberg and Munich. John collaborated on writing a book about forgiveness in which he wrote down his experiences. Let me share a bit of it with you.

“By the time we reached Munich, hundreds of enemy soldiers were surrendering. Nevertheless the city had to be cleansed of die-hard enemies who often holed up in apartment buildings from which they could fire upon us as we moved through it. It was on the third floor of such a building that I encountered a German major in full dress uniform. As our eyes met he instinctively moved his hand toward the P-38 pistol at his hip. My rifle at the ready, I shouted “Nein! Nein! Fortunately, I believe for both of us, he

heeded my warning and threw up his hands in surrender. He showed no resistance as I relieved him of his pistol, dress bayonet and binoculars. I still have them after 65 years," John added.

"Had he not heeded my warning I may have had to shoot him. Years later, I realized…that part of me wanted him to go for his pistol, giving me justification to shoot him on the spot. Why? I had just come from Dachau."

On April 29, John Boyle was in one of the first American united to liberate the infamous German concentration camp at Dachau. John wrote:

"The sights and smells…stunned me…that anything so horrible, so brutal, so obscene could have happened at all, much less perpetrated by human being on other humans beings…that display of carnage was better proof of the end result of anger, prejudice and hatred – to their logical conclusion.

"Then came outrage and the desire to strike out, to even the score…to kill the killers…Like that German major." But then John reflected: "Would I have been so different from those who were now the object of my wrath? God forgive me, I thought, God forgive us all."

Evolutionary Biologists tell us that we are hard-wired for revenge, retaliation – that survival in nature requires overcoming and eliminating anything that threatens our existence. The fittest survive. The weakest do not. And so we know about the "Revenge Cycle." We respond to an attack by attacking. When we are hurt we strike back. Psychology and Anthropology know that individuals, families, tribes, nations become trapped in the Revenge Cycle for generations; the most dramatic current example, and the most tragically futile, is what continues to happen between Israel and the Palestinians, and Sunni and Shia Arabs.

It does not have to be this way. There is an alternative. Jesus taught it. Jesus demonstrated it.

And when human beings have had the courage to try it, to do it, miracles happen. It is not for the weak of spirit. It requires great moral and emotional strength. It is called forgiveness. It is not forgetting the evil done. It is not tolerating evil. It is confronting evil in a whole new way.

When the Apartheid system in South Africa, by which a small minority of white people oppressed, persecuted, and robbed the majority black population of human rights, human dignity, was finally dismantled, the world held its breath. If ever there was a situation tailor-made for violent vengeance – that was it. Everyone anticipated the inevitable blood bath. That it did not happen is a result of the extraordinary moral leadership of Nelson Mandela and the influence of wise religious leaders like Anglican Bishop Desmond Tutu. Mandela had been in a South African prison for 27 years, as a "terrorist." Tutu writes: "It took 27 years for Mandela to be

transformed from an angry, unforgiving young radical into an icon of reconciliation, forgiveness and honor."

Bishop Tutu was appointed to organize Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. He developed a Four-Fold Process of Forgiveness, which included:

Telling the Story
Naming the Hurt
Granting Forgiveness
Renewing or Releasing the Relationship

Perpetrators of oppression and violence and their victims were invited to appear before the commission and tell their stories – both perpetrators and victims. The situation in South Africa is not perfect, but it is a lot better than the blood bath of revenge and retaliation that everyone expected.

There is a deep truth here that is relevant for each one of us. The Revenge Cycle traps everyone: the offenders, but also the offended one. Revenge feels sweet, getting even feels fair and just. But all it does is continue the cycle.

When someone rises up with the moral courage to break the cycle – new possibilities, a new world begin to emerge. When you forgive someone who has wronged you – you not only free that person – you free yourself. Forgiveness frees us from our own captivity.

The late Henri Nouwen wrote: "As long as we do not forgive those who have wounded us, we carry them with us, or worse, pull them along as a heavy load. The great temptation is to cling in anger to our enemies and then define ourselves as being offended and wounded by them. Forgiveness therefore liberates not only the other but also ourselves." [See *The Alchemy of Forgiveness: Conference Transcript: Fourth Presbyterian Church*, 2/7/98]

It was my very great privilege to know and be a friend to the late Archbishop of Chicago, Joseph Cardinal Bernadin. He was an extraordinary man, a strong but gentle leader, inclusive and ecumenical in his outlook, accepted our invitation to preach from our Presbyterian pulpit – which at the time was unprecedented, he encouraged interfaith dialogue, reached out to the city's Jewish community, was respected and much loved by all. And then he was very publically accused of abusing a young seminarian, Stephen Cook, years earlier. Cook was critically ill, dying of AIDS, living alone. It was devastating, humiliating. The press gave it lots of attention and prime first page space. Cardinal Bernadin denied the accusation, started an investigation and went about his work. Then Stephen Cook changed his story and withdrew the accusation, but much damage and hurt had been done.

Bernadin did the most remarkable thing: reached out to Stephen Cook, said he wanted to tell him that he harbored no ill feelings and wanted to pray with him.

The meeting happened in a Philadelphia seminary. Cook told his story, including his anger and alienation from the church. They talked for a while. The Cardinal said what he came to say, gave Mr. Cook an inscribed Bible and offered to say Mass. Cook hesitated. He had not felt welcomed by his church and hadn't attended Mass for years. Bernadin reached into his brief case and pulled out a hundred-year-old chalice. "This is a gift from a man I don't even know. He sent it to me to use if I ever had the opportunity to say Mass for you some day." "Please," Stephen Cook said through his tears, "Let's celebrate Mass now."

Afterward Cook said, "A big burden has been lifted from me today. I feel healed and very much at peace." Later, Cardinal Bernadin reflected: "As we flew back to Chicago that evening, father Donohue and I felt the lightness of spirit that an afternoon of grace brings to one's life." [*The Gift of Peace*, pp.34-41]

A lightness of spirit that an afternoon of grace brings.

You are invited to that. You open yourself to it when you pray familiar words. And, when you understand and experience that Jesus died to show you God's love for you, God's acceptance, God's forgiveness extended to you – even before you ask for it.

You make it a reality in your life when you let go of your anger and resentment and forgive those who have wronged you.

Jesus promised that as you do that, as you forgive, you will know and deeply experience, perhaps for the first time, the love and grace and forgiveness for which everyone one of us longs and needs, and for which he died.

Forgive and you will be forgiven.

Jesus said it. All praise to him.